

YOUNG ITALIANS' SEXUAL DEBUT: THE ROLE OF FAMILY

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1. Introduction

In most developed countries, last decades have seen the postponement of the events marking the transition to adulthood, such as the end of the education, leaving the parental home, union formation, and entry into parenthood (Fussell and Furstenberg, 2005; Twenge and Park, 2017). The age at sexual debut has been characterized, instead, by an opposite process, lowering considerably. At the same time, the entry into adult sexuality has progressively acquired autonomy in the sequence of events that characterize the life of an individual, not only with regard to marriage, but also from a stable romantic relationship, becoming an independent step (Ongaro, 2004). In addition, the age at and the contexts of sexual initiation have changed much, with young men's and women's behaviours becoming more "gender-equal" (Bozon and Kontula, 2014; WHO, 2016). In Italy, this process started with the cohorts born in the second half of the XX century (Caltabiano *et al.*, 2006).

Whereas the transition to adulthood has been largely studied (for Italy, see, for example, Mazzuco *et al.*, 2006; Sironi *et al.*, 2015), rather less attention has been paid to the study of sexual debut. This is, at least partly, due to a relatively scarce availability of nationwide large samples. However, thanks to the data from the SELFY (Sexual and Emotional LiFe of Youth) survey conducted in 2017, recent and rich information on the beginning of affective and sexual life of undergraduate students at public Italian universities are available, accompanied by a large set of information on individual, social, and family characteristics. Moreover, the survey is an exact replication of a similar investigation run in 2000-2001 (ISS – Italian Students Sexuality) and this permits meaningful comparisons across time of young Italians' sexual behaviours and their determinants.

Our aim is to verify whether the relationship between the family context and the sexual debut has converged in the last decades between young Italian men and women.

2. Family background and young people's sexual debut

The general framework in which the student experiences his/her adolescence, and in particular the family of origin of the student, has been found to influence sexual initiation of children (Longmore *et al.*, 2001; van de Bongardt *et al.*, 2014).

More specifically, the literature suggests that more educated parents support and promote their children's investments in education and future occupation. These investments might be hampered by an early sexual debut and, thus, children of more educated parents are more likely to experience later sexual debut (Manlove *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, highly educated people, which are usually more open-minded toward sexuality compared to their lower educated counterparts (Treas, 2002), might act in the opposite direction, anticipating their children's sexual debut. Also the occupational status of mothers during early adolescence could have a role: having an employed mother could cause a greater freedom, whereas not employed mothers are more likely to be more traditional and might control to a wider extent their children, who, thus, could experience sexual initiation later (Hogan *et al.*, 2000).

As regards the relationship with parents, previous literature suggests that a good relationship with parents contributes to the construction of a mature identity and could help avoiding early entry into sexuality (Longmore *et al.*, 2009; de Graaf *et al.*, 2011, 2012); in addition, a good parent-child relation could delay sexual debut also because adolescents who are close to their parents may be more inclined to live up to their parents' wishes (de Graaf *et al.*, 2011). At the opposite, frayed relations accelerate sexual initiation: adolescents with negative relationships with parents may look for support and closeness in relationships outside the family, which clearly provide the opportunity for sexual debut (Davila *et al.*, 2009; de Graaf *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, reverse causation could occur, and parent-child relation could deteriorate as a result of children's sexual initiation since parents (not necessarily consciously) blame their children for not following their expectations, or as a simple reaction to a sign that their children are approaching adulthood (Ream, 2006). It is also possible that there is no causal relation and both sexual initiation and a distant relation with parents are both aspects of the same developmental process of growing up (Ream and Savin-Williams, 2005). In fact, some studies have found no relationship between parental closeness and timing of adolescent sexual debut (Longmore *et al.*, 2001), whereas others show that the relation depend on the gender of the adolescent, with stronger parental influence for young women than for men (Markham *et al.*, 2010; de Graaf *et al.*, 2011, 2012).

Regarding parent-child communication about sexuality, the direction of the association with sexual initiation is not very straightforward (Longmore *et al.*, 2009, Markham *et al.*, 2010). We may suppose that students who talk about sexuality with their parents anticipate their first sexual intercourse, due both to the fact they are

informed about the topic, and the fact that parents who talk about sexuality are more likely to be more open (van de Bongardt *et al.*, 2014). Nevertheless, some results from previous studies report a positive association between sexual communication and delay of sexual debut, due to a more prudent behaviour of students for fear of undesired consequences (Markham *et al.*, 2010). Again, all these explanations are ‘unilateral’, but the opposite direction of the connection between communication and sexual debut might work, too (de Graaf *et al.*, 2011).

Finally, another aspect of family context that could influence adolescents’ sexual debut is the freedom of behaviour granted to children by parents. Literature on this topic is not so rich. No relation has been found between sexual debut and this dimension of parenting, but this is probably due to the fact that it is not the control in itself that matters, but the way in which the control is exercised (Longmore *et al.*, 2009). However, parents who give their children freedom in many behaviours tend to encourage somehow an early entry into sexual activity (Caltabiano, 2007).

3. The Italian context

Italian cohorts born in the first half of the XX century experienced their sexual debut in the so-called ‘double-standard system’, which is opposed to sexual ‘egalitarian models’ characterizing western and northern European countries (Bozon and Kontula, 2014). Usually, for Italian men the first sexual intercourse was a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood, often experienced outside a couple relationship. For women, instead, a couple relationship usually preceded intercourse, that was experienced at marriage or with their husband-to-be just before marriage, and was thus closely connected to family formation.

Starting from cohorts born in the 1960s, a convergence in the age at first sexual intercourse of men and women has begun (Caltabiano *et al.*, 2006), with women lowering their age at sexual debut. The same cohorts were characterized also by a convergence in the context of the sexual debut, with men experiencing more often their first sexual intercourse within a steady couple relationship and women pretty before marriage (Caltabiano, 2013).

Finally, most recent research shows a partial convergence toward the ‘egalitarian regime’, with sexual life that frequently anticipates the first romantic relationship also for young women (WHO, 2016; Dalla-Zuanna *et al.*, 2019). Despite all these changes, Italy remains a country with strong family ties, a greater attachment to Catholic values and a slow transition to adulthood (Ongaro, 2001), all factors that tend to slow down the sexual initiation of young Italians.

In the light of the above review, in this paper we intend to verify whether the role of family in sexual initiation of Italian men and women has changed across the last

seventeen years. In particular, we investigate whether the genders differences in the association between family background and sexual debut are decreasing across time. To test our hypothesis, we estimated event history models for the transition to a first sexual intercourse, separately for young men and women as well as for the years of the two surveys (2000-2001 and 2017), and included a large set of family contextual characteristics. We also added several control variables related to individual characteristics and factors associated to life experiences.

4. Data and methods

4.1. *SELFY and ISS surveys*

Data come from the SELFY survey (Dalla-Zuanna *et al.*, 2019), conducted in 2017, and the ISS survey (Dalla-Zuanna and Crisafulli, 2004) conducted in late 2000 – early 2001. The samples consist of students attending undergraduate courses in Economics and Statistics in Italian public universities, 4,998 students in 2000-2001 (from now on 2000 survey) and 8,094 in 2017.

In our analyses we kept 4,605 students interviewed in 2000 (41.4% men) and 7,479 (52.6% men) in 2017, excluding those students who did not answer questions on the first sexual intercourse and those who stated that they did not live in Italy at the time of the interview or during secondary school¹.

4.2. *Multivariate analyses: the transition to first sexual intercourse*

To study the association of family contextual characteristics with sexual debut, we used piecewise-constant exponential models for the transition to a first sexual intercourse, separately by gender and survey year (e.g., Blossfeld and Rohwer, 2002). The baseline hazard was time elapsed from age 10 (divided into four time periods: 10-13 years; 14-15; 16-17; 18 and more) to the occurrence of the first sexual intercourse or the interview date, whichever occurred first.

Given the relevance of family characteristics in influencing sexual debut, as seen in § 2, we considered several covariates in this respect. Specifically, besides parents' religiosity during respondents' early adolescence and parents' marital status, we included, from one hand, variables on social origin, such as parents' educational

¹ Literature suggests that migratory background can be important for youth's sexual behaviours (Gabielli *et al.*, 2020), and thus foreigners' sexual debut should require a separate investigation. However, this is beyond the scope of this paper, also due to the low number of foreign students in our sample.

level and mother's occupational status during students' early adolescence. On the other hand, we included variables defining the parenting style and family climate during students' adolescence, such as: the relation with mother and father; communication with parents about sexuality, and freedom of behaviour granted to children by parents² (we consider if parents allowed students four behaviours during (late) adolescence: coming home late for dinner without letting them know; coming home late on Saturday night; coming home late on other nights; spending moments of intimacy at home with boy/girlfriend).

The individual characteristics (besides age, which was the baseline hazard) included as time-constant control variables were the following: the area of residence at interview, the religiosity during early adolescence, the type of upper-secondary school attended, and the upper-secondary school final score, the satisfaction with physical appearance during middle adolescence, the reaction to school and parents' rules during adolescence.

Finally, we also added as controls a third group of covariates describing individual life experiences and lifestyle during middle adolescence. In particular, we included as dummy variables: if the student practiced sports often or very often; if s/he never went to discos; if s/he was a smoker; if s/he ever a) got drunk, or b) tried ecstasy, marijuana or other drugs before 16 years old. Lastly, we included two time-varying covariates signalling if a first non-complete sexual experience had happened and if a first couple relationship had been experienced. We are aware that these two variables are intervening variables and usually precede sexual intercourse. Nevertheless, the entry into adult sexuality is progressively becoming autonomous with respect to the formation of romantic relationship, or it may be fastened compared to the past, with a lower waiting time between first time to non-complete sexual experiences and first time to sexual intercourse. In this respect, excluding those covariates might lead to an overestimation of the effect of other individual and family covariates, especially for students who answered in 2000.

5. Results

Table 1 lists the parameter estimates of regression models, describing the risk of experiencing a first sexual intercourse for male and female students in 2000 (first

² In preliminary analyses, we considered also another covariate connected with family, namely the presence of older siblings. Literature shows it can influence sexual behaviours of youth, giving important information about the potential market of sexual partners, in terms of availability (see, for example, Carella *et al.*, 2020). However, this covariate did not turn to be significant and thus it has not been included in the final models presented here.

and second columns) and in 2017 (last two columns). We focus on the results related to the role of family factors.

Family context has a crucial role for students' sexual initiation both for male and female students, but the multifaced aspects of family context matter differently for young men and women, and also across time. First of all, the role of parental education is quite gender-differentiated, even if things changed in more recent years. Young men with highly educated parents have a later age at first sexual intercourse both in 2000 and in 2017, confirming results by literature. Surprisingly, at the opposite, having low educated parents decreases women' risks of sexual initiation in 2000 (a result found also in some Italian previous studies, for example, Dalla-Zuanna and Mancin, 2004), whereas in 2017, the highest risk of a first sexual intercourse pertains to young women with middle educated parents. Male students whose mothers were employed have a higher risk of experiencing a first sexual intercourse both in 2000 and in 2017; for females, this holds only in 2000.

As regards the relationship with parents, results suggest a very complex picture and underlie the importance of considering parents' sex in the evaluation of the parent-child relationship. In 2000, a close relationship with the parent of the same sex anticipates sexual initiation and, at the opposite, a close relationship with the parent of the opposite sex delays sexual debut, for both young men and young women. In 2017, the role of the relationship with the father remains the same. Instead, a close relationship with the mother has no impact for men and decreases the risk of sexual initiation for women. Relating to the role of the communication with parents about sexuality, the presence of communication is associated with early ages at sexual debut for men, but this is significant only in 2000. For women, talking with parents about sexuality is negatively connected with sexual initiation in 2000, and the association becomes positive in 2017 (namely, it increases the risk). Thus, both for the relationship with parents and for the communication with parents about sexuality, in recent years the association of these aspects with sexual initiation is stronger for women than for men, confirming what found in some previous studies of a stronger susceptibility of women' sexuality than men' one to family influences.

Lastly, confirming what found in the literature, the more parents are indulgent and permissive with adolescents, the more the students anticipate sexual debut, and this is consistent for young men and women and across years. Thus, the age at first sexual intercourse is connected with whether or not parents do an active control and supervision on their children's behaviour.

As regards the control covariates, for many individual characteristics and most covariates describing social life and interactions, there are not many differences between men and women.

In sum, whereas many individual characteristics and life experiences already show a convergence between genders in their association with sexual debut, family

contextual characteristics are still quite far from reaching a convergence between genders about their influence on sexual debut.

Table 1 – *Piecewise-constant exponential models describing the risk of first sexual intercourse. β coefficients. Separate models by gender and year of interview.*

| | 2000 | | 2017 | |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| | Males | Females | Males | Females |
| INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS | | | | |
| <i>Age (ref: 18 and more)</i> | | | | |
| 10-13 | -2.98*** | -2.66*** | -2.94*** | -2.92*** |
| 14-15 | -1.23*** | -0.64*** | -1.14*** | -0.74*** |
| 16-17 | -0.36*** | 0.27*** | -0.21*** | -0.01 |
| <i>Geographical area of residence at interview (ref: North-West)</i> | | | | |
| North-East | 0.26** | 0.16* | -0.08 | -0.11* |
| Centre | 0.14 | -0.09 | -0.02 | -0.12* |
| South | 0.16* | -0.17** | 0.16*** | -0.08 |
| <i>Religiosity during early adolescence (ref: not religious)</i> | | | | |
| Irregular attendance to Sunday Mass | -0.05 | -0.26*** | -0.12*** | -0.05 |
| Regular attendance to Sunday Mass | -0.29*** | -0.31*** | -0.35*** | -0.16*** |
| Don't remember | -0.03 | -0.47*** | 0.29* | 0.05 |
| <i>Type of secondary school (ref: vocational school)</i> | | | | |
| High school | 0.38 | -0.18 | -0.38*** | -0.56*** |
| Polytechnic | 0.29 | -0.17 | -0.35*** | -0.49*** |
| <i>Secondary school final score</i> | | | | |
| | -0.01*** | -0.00 | -0.01 | -0.01 |
| <i>Reaction to secondary school rules during secondary school (ref: often complained, they were too strict)</i> | | | | |
| Usually accepted them | -0.48*** | 0.04 | -0.18*** | 0.36*** |
| Didn't usually complain, although they were too strict | -0.45*** | 0.03 | -0.22*** | 0.31*** |
| <i>Reaction to parents' rules during adolescence (ref: did not understand them and often argued)</i> | | | | |
| Usually accepted them | -0.30*** | -0.45*** | -0.27*** | -0.22*** |
| Tried to have more freedom | -0.17** | -0.12* | -0.17*** | 0.07 |
| <i>Satisfaction with physical appearance during middle adolescence (ref: not satisfied or only fairly)</i> | | | | |
| Satisfied | 0.03 | 0.21*** | 0.12** | 0.01 |
| FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS | | | | |
| <i>Highest parents' educational level (ref: high)</i> | | | | |
| Medium | 0.14* | 0.08 | 0.02 | 0.14*** |
| Low | 0.27*** | -0.21** | 0.11** | -0.02 |
| <i>Mother employed when the student was 11-13 (ref: yes)</i> | | | | |
| No | -0.15** | -0.23*** | -0.22*** | 0.06 |
| Don't remember | 0.16 | -0.74*** | -0.05 | 0.08 |
| <i>Relationship with the father during adolescence (ref: distant)</i> | | | | |
| Close relationship | 0.21*** | -0.13*** | 0.12** | -0.17*** |
| <i>Relationship with the mother during adolescence (ref: distant)</i> | | | | |
| Close relationship | -0.36*** | 0.21*** | -0.11 | -0.24*** |
| <i>Communication with parents about sexuality (ref: in-depth)</i> | | | | |
| No communication | -0.41*** | 0.25*** | -0.02 | -0.31*** |
| Only superficial | -0.21*** | 0.00 | 0.03 | -0.18*** |
| <i>Freedom of behaviour granted to children (ref: very indulgent parents)</i> | | | | |
| No indulgent parents | -0.40*** | -0.21*** | -0.25*** | -0.21*** |
| Little indulgent parents | -0.17** | -0.14** | -0.07* | -0.14*** |

* significant at ten percent; ** significant at five percent; *** significant at one percent

Table 1 – continued.

| | 2000 | | 2017 | |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| | Males | Females | Males | Females |
| LIFE EXPERIENCES | | | | |
| <i>Practicing sports during middle adolescence</i> (ref: never or only sometimes) | | | | |
| Often or very often | 0.25*** | 0.13** | 0.20*** | 0.11*** |
| <i>Going to discos during middle adolescence</i> (ref: no) | | | | |
| Yes | 0.31*** | 0.15*** | 0.16*** | 0.11*** |
| <i>Smoked during middle adolescence</i> (ref: no) | | | | |
| Yes | 0.23*** | 0.38*** | 0.47*** | 0.25*** |
| <i>Got drunk before 16</i> (ref: no) | | | | |
| Yes | 0.16** | 0.11 | 0.01 | 0.10* |
| <i>Have tried ecstasy, marijuana, or other drugs before 16</i> (ref: no) | | | | |
| Yes | 0.20** | 0.40*** | 0.05 | 0.14* |
| <i>Whether the student experienced the first couple relationship</i> (TV) (ref: no) | | | | |
| Yes | 0.73*** | 1.14*** | 0.90*** | 1.19*** |
| Did not answer** | 0.89*** | 1.03*** | 0.85*** | 1.06*** |
| <i>Whether the student had the first sexual experiences</i> (TV) (ref: no) | | | | |
| Yes | 2.38*** | 2.45*** | 2.21*** | 1.99*** |
| Did not answer** | 1.77** | 2.05*** | 1.49*** | 1.19*** |
| <i>Intercept</i> | -9.01*** | -9.95*** | -8.66*** | -8.63*** |
| N | 1,838 | 2,645 | 3,750 | 3,423 |

* significant at ten percent; ** significant at five percent; ***significant at one percent

6. Discussion and conclusion

Many developments have characterized sexual attitudes and behaviour of young Italians in the last two decades: age at first intercourse has lowered, homosexual relationships have become more accepted, the number of partners has increased. More generally, sexual behaviours and attitudes of young men and women appear to converge in several respects (contraception, casual sex, betrayal). In this paper, we specifically analysed the changes in the correlates of sexual debut among a large sample of university students, with the aim to verify if a convergence has been achieved. In particular, we tested whether in recent years there has been a convergence between genders in the relationship between family contextual characteristics and sexual initiation of young Italians over time.

However, contrary to what expected, we verified that there is only a partial convergence: indeed, there are still many differences between young men and women with respect to the role of family context characteristics. Among differences by gender which remain strong, social origin has a diverse impact on sexual debut of young men and women. Low parental education increases the risk of having a first sexual intercourse for young men as reported by the literature (e.g., Coppola, 2007), but not for women. At the same time, in line with what previously found (Hogan *et*

al., 2000), in 2000 having a not employed mother favours a higher age at first sexual intercourse for both genders, whereas in 2017 there has been a gender differentiation, with a lower risk for males only. Thus, a convergence in the impact of social origin does not seem to occur.

Moreover, we found no convergence in the effect of the relationship with father and mother on the risk of sexual debut, showing that strong ties with the father act in an opposite direction between young men and women both in 2000 and in 2017, a difference that persists in recent years. Instead, a close relationship with the mother has changed its impact on the risk of first sexual intercourse, and in 2017 the two effects are closer than in the past (a close relationship lowers the risk, but it is not significant for young men). In very recent years, too, the association of the relationship with parents and sexual initiation is stronger for women than for men, confirming what found in some previous studies of a stronger susceptibility of women' sexuality than men' one to family influences (Graaf *et al.*, 2011, 2012). Finally, also communicating with parents about sexuality has a gender differentiated impact, but it becomes attenuated in the last year: while in 2000 having no communication is associated with a lower risk for young men and a higher risk for young women, in 2017 both risks become lower - even if no longer significant for young men, supporting what found in other studies (Markham *et al.*, 2010).

Conversely, parenting style shows a similar association with sexual debut for young men and women, with students with more indulgent and permissive parents anticipating sexual debut (Ongaro, 2004; Caltabiano, 2007).

Generally speaking, family context still plays a different role in sexual debut of young men and women, suggesting that the gender convergence has not been reached. Moreover, some characteristics are related to earlier sexual intercourse for men but not for women: having a close relationship with father, belonging to a lower social stratum, they are all elements signalling that the traditional model of masculinity has not disappeared, especially in some contexts.

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SUMMARY

Young Italians' sexual debut: The role of family

In most developed countries, last decades have seen the postponement of the events marking the transition to adulthood, while the age at sexual debut has been progressively anticipated. At the same time, the entry into adult sexuality has gradually acquired autonomy in the sequence of events that characterize the life of an individual, and young men's and women's behaviours have become more similar. Our aim is to verify if the role of family contextual factors associated with sexual debut has changed across the XXI century, leading to a similarity in these relationships between young male and female students. Using data from the Italian Students Sexuality survey run in 2000-2001 and the Sexual and Emotional LiFe of Youth survey conducted in 2017, we applied event history models for the transition to first sexual intercourse. We find that there is only a partial convergence: family background, even when controlling for individual characteristics, still influences differently young men's and women's age at sexual debut.

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